

Surveying Urban Agriculture in Jordan



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Doug Alexander

[Photo: Mohammed Shakhathreh and his baby sister Reem inspect a citrus fruit from their urban garden.]

A trend is blooming between Amman's buildings and backyards that brings meaning to the question: 'how does your garden grow?'

Approximately one in six households in the Jordanian capital of 1.8 million people grow their own fruit, vegetables, and herbs — some even raise chickens and goats.

While such practices have been common in Latin America and Africa for decades, sowing seeds and raising livestock on such a wide scale within a bustling city have been foreign to the Middle East until now.

Household survey

The modern city of Amman, home to 31 % of Jordan's population, is one of the first in this arid region to embrace what experts call 'urban agriculture'. Jordan's Department of Statistics has been scrutinizing this trend since 1998 through a project supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which surveyed 1,350 Amman households to determine how prevalent farming is within the city.

Gardens are part of the agricultural sector, says survey assistant Abeer Al Esah. In order to have a complete picture of agriculture in Jordan you have to have some figures about agriculture in houses.

Few regulations

The Department of Statistics hopes this research will influence municipal and national policies on a practice that has received so little government attention that few regulations exist to guide city farmers.

Today, an estimated 50,000 households — rich and poor — practice urban agriculture and devote as much as 15 % of their land to their garden, according to the Department's initial findings. City gardeners grow grapes, olives, apricots, apples, pears, spinach, onions, garlic, and various herbs on plots averaging nine square metres. Some raise chickens, providing households with eggs and poultry. Some larger urban farms — upwards of 200 square metres — even dabble in livestock.

Domestic animals

There are some households who rear animals such as sheep and goats, says Esad. They sell the products — milk and cheese — which gives money and benefits for the household owners.

Gardens sprout from the most unlikely places, like in northern Amman's densely populated Palestinian refugee camps. Here, tiny gardens provide a bit of fruit, vegetables, herbs, and greenery among concrete houses packed in this impoverished neighbourhood.

Popular grapevine

Rasmeh Mahshi has spent three years tending to her plants. A bushy grapevine envelops a wire trestle above her doorway, providing shade for pots of rosemary, jasmine, and other herbs on her concrete stoop. I consume all these products in my house, she says, adding that she must be quick with the grapes: Some kids from the street pick from the vines.

Although Mahshi eats the grapes and uses the herbs and vine leaves for cooking, not enough grows to affect her household budget. But for her it's not important. I like the greenery and I like the plants, nothing more, she says.

Mini-farm

Across town in the upscale Ummusumaq neighbourhood, one family transformed a sizeable plot outside their apartment building into a mini-farm within two years. My husband enjoys planting — me too — and the kids do also, says Samia Shakhathreh. It's enjoyable when you can pick your own fruit.

Small trees that bear fruit — peaches, figs, olives, and apples — provide shelter for strawberry bushes, mulberry shrubs, and a half-dozen types of herbs. Onions, squash, garlic, and pumpkins also grow in the rich reddish-brown soil.

Labour of love

Everything grown here is for their own consumption — this garden is a labour of love. Still, Shakhathreh admits her family saves up to 200 Jordanian dinars (US\$280) a year by growing their own produce instead of buying it in the market — a significant amount in a country where the average annual income is JD 1,100 (US\$1,550).

Almost everything produced in Amman's urban gardens is consumed by the household: only 1 % of the fruit and 5 % of milk is sold to neighbours or local markets. The survey also shows that urban gardeners come from all walks of life — professionals, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and trades workers — and all educational backgrounds. Men and women share equally in this activity, although most men are hired hands while 84 % of the women are housewives tending their gardens for free. The Department of Statistics estimates that urban agriculture in Amman generates JD \$1.9 million (US\$3.5 million) annually.

Pitfalls

But urban agriculture can also have pitfalls. Amman's urban gardeners are making heavy use of pesticides, fertilizers, and discarded household water — often without knowing what they're doing. Pests and plant diseases combined with a lack of water, quality soil, knowledge, and money are affecting productivity.

Still, urban agriculture may be the future for Middle Eastern countries suffering from the pressures of urbanization and water scarcity. In the Middle East, the poor — who are increasingly found in urban areas — will have to depend to a greater extent on food that is grown within their cities, says IDRC Senior Program Specialist [Naser Faruqui](#), who oversees the project. Urban farming can be a source of good quality nutritious food that is affordable to the poor, which they can grow themselves or even purchase from their neighbours.

Benefits

Urban agriculture can also offset rising food prices caused by Jordan's chronic water shortages. Fresh water is being transferred from agriculture to urban areas, which is threatening food production in the countryside, says Faruqui. As a result, Jordan is faced with increased food production costs or expensive food imports — prompting higher prices and an additional burden for the poor.

In such circumstances, he notes, urban farming could be advantageous. I think that urban agriculture, combined with safe, treated waste-water reuse, will be a key element in an integrated strategy to maintain food production despite growing water scarcity in the Middle East.

Doug Alexander is a Canadian journalist who has been working in the Middle East with Gemini News Service under an internship award granted by the IDRC. (Photo: D. Alexander)

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If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

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